



Basic Etiquette: People with Intellectual Disabilities

1. People with intellectual disabilities are not "eternal children." Adults with intellectual disabilities should be treated and spoken to in the same fashion as other adults. Do not "talk down" to a person with an intellectual disability. Assume that an adult with an intellectual disability has had the same experiences as any other adult.
2. Like everyone else, people with intellectual disabilities are extremely diverse in their capabilities and interests. Avoid stereotypes, such as the assumption that all people with intellectual disabilities enjoy doing jobs that are repetitive, or want to work in fast food restaurants or supermarkets.
3. Many people with intellectual disabilities can read and write. Don't assume that a person with an intellectual disability lacks academic skills, such as reading, writing, and the ability to do mathematics. While an individual's disability may significantly impact these areas, many people with intellectual disabilities have at least some level of these academic skills.
4. Even if people's academic skills are limited, they still have much to share and contribute. A low level of academic skills does not mean that people don't have valuable ideas and thoughts. Provide opportunities for people with limited academic skills to contribute verbally, and take what they have to say seriously. Ensure that people who have difficulties reading or writing have equal access to written materials (for example, by taping them or having someone review the materials with them orally). Use pictures or simple photographs to identify rooms, tasks, or directions.
5. Treat the individual as you would anyone else. If engaging in a conversation with someone with an intellectual disability, bring up the same topics of conversation as you would with anyone else such as weekend activities, vacation plans, the weather, or recent events.
6. Giving instructions. People with intellectual disabilities can understand directions if you take your time and are patient. Use clear language that is concise and to the point. When giving instructions, proceed slowly, and ask the person to summarize the information, to ensure that it has been understood. You may have to repeat yourself several times in order for the individual to take in all the information. "Walk through" the steps of a task or project. Let an individual perform each part of the task after you explain it.
7. Don't defer to a staff person or caregiver. When a person with an intellectual disability is accompanied by another person such as a staff person, caregiver, or family member, don't direct questions and comments to them. Speak directly to the person with the intellectual disability. Also, don't allow someone else to speak for the person with a disability.
8. Avoid the term "mental retardation." If you need to speak about a person's disability, people with intellectual disabilities prefer the term "developmental disability" rather than "mental retardation." (Intellectual disability is one type of developmental disability.)

Reprinted with permission from the National Center on Workforce and Disability, Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston. Modified to reflect "intellectual disability" as proper terminology. To note, the term "mental retardation" is no longer accepted in any form of American vernacular.